

**DECISION MEMO**  
**TABLE MOUNTAIN WILDFIRE PROTECTION PROJECT**  
**U.S. FOREST SERVICE**  
**LASSEN NATIONAL FOREST**  
**HAT CREEK RANGER DISTRICT**  
**SHASTA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA**

**BACKGROUND**

The Hat Creek Ranger District is proposing the Table Mountain Wildfire Protection Project (Project) to thin existing timber stands and reduce tree densities and fuels on approximately 65 acres surrounding the Table Mountain Communication Site. The thinning will occur adjacent to existing microwave towers, and along three microwave signal paths located approximately 1.5 miles northeast of the junction of Highways 44 and 89, immediately north of the Lassen Volcanic National Park (Figure 1). The legal location is: T31N, R4E, Sections 6 and 7, Mount Diablo Meridian.

The Table Mountain Communication Site is an essential operational element of the California-Oregon Transmission Project (COTP). The COTP is part of a rated transmission path in the western United States and supports regional electricity transfers between California and the Pacific Northwest COTP. The communication site uses microwave towers to send data across several miles. The data is used to remotely operate the transmission grid for the COTP. Microwaves need a clear path to reach their destination. The microwave towers therefore need a clear line-of-sight across the sending and receiving towers. Trees, terrain, and fog can obstruct the microwave signal path. The facilities also serve other tenants at the site, including Jefferson State Radio Associates LLC, AT&T, PG&E, T-Mobile, and Verizon.

The forest surrounding the communication site is characterized by dense timber and the accumulation of significant ground and ladder fuels that could easily ignite and rapidly spread under adverse fire conditions. In addition, this dense timber has grown to a height that may block communication signals.

There is a need to provide for adequate defensible space around the communications and critical energy infrastructure in the event of a wildfire. There is also a need to establish long-term reliability with respect to the strength of the microwave and communications signals being transmitted from the towers.

The purpose of this project is to reduce vegetation density and the risk of ignition and spread of wildfire and to minimize tree related microwave path interference for at least the next ten years.

Figure 1: Project and Vicinity Map

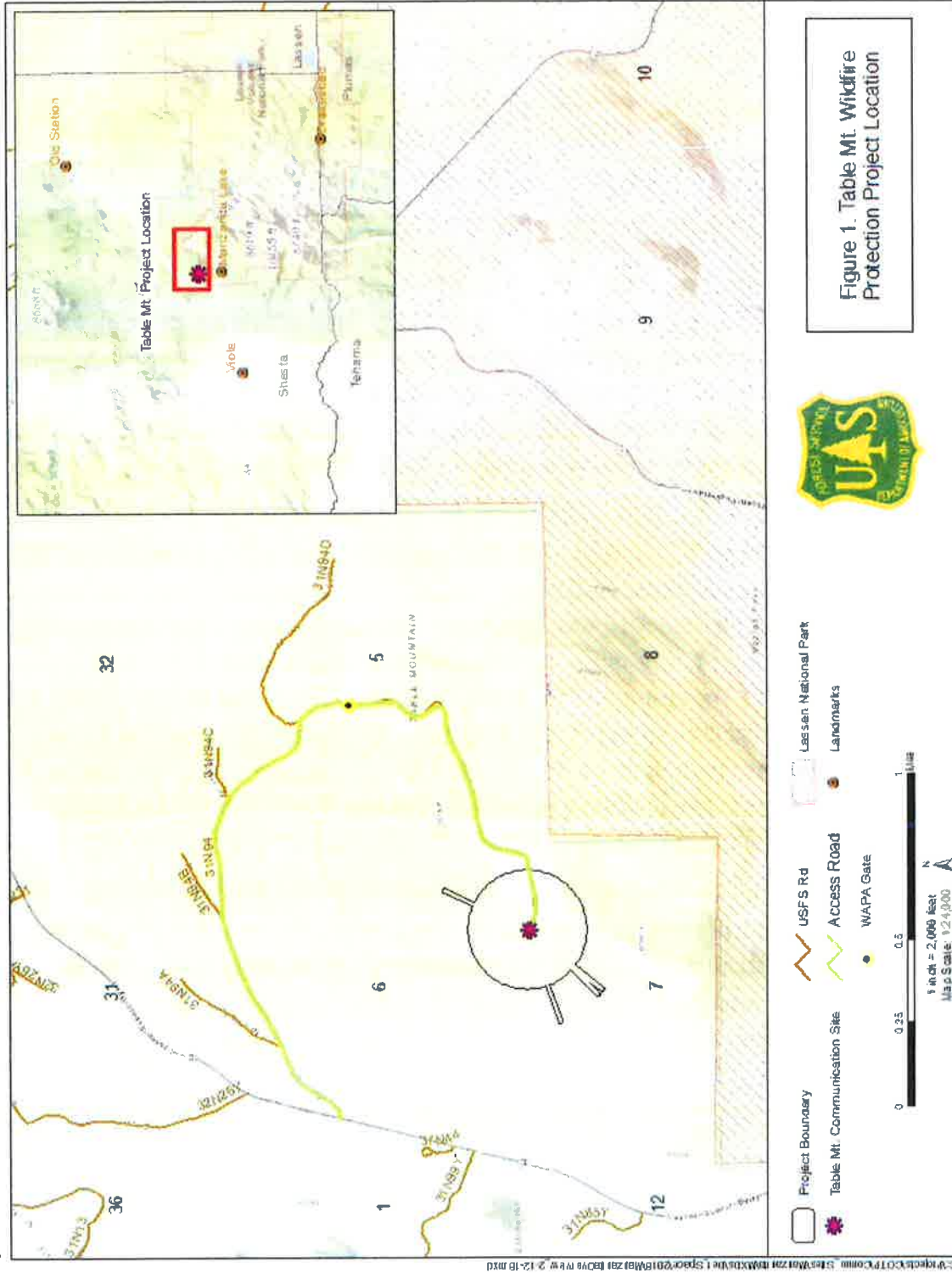


Figure 1. Table Mt. Wildfire Protection Project Location

## DECISION

I have decided to implement the actions of the Table Mountain Wildfire Protection Project as follows:

### Timber Stand Thinning

The proposed thinning will entail the mechanical removal of trees at the Table Mountain communication site (Figure 1). Thinning objectives will attempt to moderate the potential size, intensity and severity of wildfires by improving tree vigor through reduction of stand densities. The retained basal area will generally be comprised of the largest trees. Within treatment units, at a minimum, the intent is to provide for an effective fuels treatment. Where existing vegetative conditions are at or near 40 percent canopy cover, the project will be designed to remove the material necessary to meet defensible space fire and fuels objectives while meeting design criteria in mature forest habitat.

Trees marked for removal will be whole tree yarded and merchantable timber will be removed as saw logs. Logging slash will be machine-piled on site for burning. Slash disposal will be conducted using accepted piling specifications that include fire-safety considerations when specifying pile sizes, compaction, surrounding fuel breaks, and required fire-line construction. Trees that do not meet merchantability standards will be removed and sold as biomass. Merchantable trees will form the basis for an administrative timber sale that will include, but not necessarily be limited to more specific fire precautions, equipment cleaning, timber removal, slash disposal, and stump treatment conditions. Treatments of stand structures are designed to be effective for a minimum of five to ten years, with a desired target efficacy of 20 years.

Thinning to maintain reliable microwave communication path signal strengths will be designed to minimize re-entries into the Project area within three microwave signal path corridors. The trees to be removed have been determined to be too close to the microwave towers and their current height and growth rates would cause them to interfere with the microwave beam paths, progressively deteriorating the communications signal strengths, stability, and quality that is essential for critical infrastructure and communications operations. Individual trees will be thinned within three microwave beam path corridors ranging from 75 to 100-feet wide and of sufficient length to prevent substantial interference with signal strengths for at least the next ten years.

### Fuels Management Activities

Project area fuels management treatments will address surface, ladder, and canopy fuels. The Project area contains large volumes of ground and ladder fuels beneath overstory trees. The treatments will remove understory trees where they serve as ladder fuels to the canopy.

Surface and ladder fuels will be removed by a combination of hand and mechanical methods to achieve no less than a 40 percent canopy cover consistent with applicable federal guidance. The entire Project area is generally level to gently sloping, therefore no restriction to mechanized techniques of fuel reduction is anticipated. These techniques will include hand and machine piling of slash, chipping or mastication of surface fuels, and chainsaw and/or mechanical thinning of understory trees.

### Integrated Design Features

The following Integrated Design Features (IDFs) are resource protection measures that are developed by specialists to reduce or eliminate any unwanted environmental effects. They are project specific and incorporated as part of the proposed action in addition to Best Management Practices (BMPs). IDFs ensure the project is consistent with the 1993 Lassen National Forest (LNF) Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) standards and guidelines as amended by the *2004 Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (SNFPA)* Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and Record of Decision (ROD) as well as other laws, regulations, and policies. These IDFs are also included as parameters that will be incorporated into treatments, contracts, or used to guide Forest Service personnel in conducting implementation.

#### *Wildlife*

For California Spotted Owl, the following IDFs would be incorporated:

If a California spotted owl nest is detected, a 300-acre spotted owl protected activity center (PAC) shall be established around the nesting site;

If the nest is within  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile of the proposed project a limited operating period (LOP) of March 1 through August 15 would be in effect.

For snag retention the following IDFs would be incorporated:

If needed, do not operate around selected snags. Aside from this standard, standing dead trees (snags) greater than 15 inches dbh that do not present a hazard for public and wood worker safety would not be felled and removed.

Trees greater than 20 inches dbh impacted from harvest equipment that result in skin-ups would be left on the landscape to serve as recruitment snags.

Retain large diameter live cull trees greater than 12 inches in diameter with unique qualities that may be of use by wildlife. This includes:

Retention of some mid- and large diameter live trees that are currently in decline, have substantial wood defect, or that have desirable characteristics (e.g. teakettle branches,

large diameter broken top, large cavities in the bole) to serve as future replacement snags and to provide nesting structure.

Where possible, large down logs (logs greater than 15 feet long and 16 inches in diameter at mid-point) would be left in place and protected to the extent practical during mechanical treatment and understory prescribed burning.

Four of the largest snags per acres will be retained as habitat trees.

For the Northern Goshawk the following IDFs would be applied:

If a northern goshawk nest is detected, a 200-acre goshawk protected activity center (GPAC) would be established around the nesting site;

An LOP would occur from February 15 – September 15, if the nest site is located within ¼ mile of project activities.

For the Marten the following IDFs would be applied:

If a den site is discovered there would be an LOP from May 1 – July 31 within an established 100-acre buffer established within the best habitat available within ¼ mile.

### *Botany*

New occurrences of TES plant species discovered before or during ground-disturbing activities will be protected through flag-and-avoid methods.

All off-road equipment would be weed-free prior to entering the Forest. Staging of equipment would be done in weed-free areas.

New small infestations identified during project implementation would be evaluated and treated according to the species present and project constraints and avoided by project activities. If larger infestations are identified during implementation, they would be isolated and avoided by equipment, or equipment used would be washed after leaving the infested area and before entering an uninfested area.

Post-project monitoring for implementation and effectiveness of weed treatments and control of new infestations would be conducted as soon as possible and for a period of two years after completion of the project.

If project implementation calls for mulches or fills, they would be certified weed-free. Seed mixes used for revegetation of disturbed sites would consist of locally adapted native plant materials to the extent practicable.

### *Hydrology/Soils*

Soil quality standards and appropriate best management practices (BMP) that protect forest soils would be implemented for the entire Project. BMP and soil standards are described in the

2012 National Forest Service BMP manual, *National Best Management Practices for Water Quality Management on National Forest System Lands*, the 1993 LNF LRMP, and the 2004 SNFPA ROD.

The areal extent of detrimental soil disturbance would not exceed 15 percent of the area dedicated to growing vegetation. Following implementation, the mechanical treatment units would be evaluated by a qualified specialist to determine if detrimentally compacted ground exceeds the Forest Plan standard of 15 percent areal extent.

Machine piling operations would remove only enough material to accomplish Project objectives and would minimize the amount of soil being pushed into burn piles. Duff and litter layers would remain as intact as possible, and the turning of equipment would be minimized.

To the extent possible, existing landings and skid trails would be used.

Mechanical equipment would not operate on slopes greater than 35 percent.

Where it exists, large woody material greater than 15 inches in diameter would be retained at a rate of at least five logs per acre.

### *Transportation*

The existing forest transportation system will be utilized to provide access to the Project area and road maintenance will be performed as needed.

Treatments are anticipated to bring the NFS roads used in this Project into conformance with assigned maintenance levels and meet BMPs to minimize erosion and sedimentation. A dust abatement plan will also be included to control erosion from road use.

### *Cultural Resources*

Cultural resources inventories and records searches have indicated that the Project will have no effect on them. The following Standard Resource Protection Measures shall be used, as identified in the Programmatic Agreement Among the U.S.D.A. Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Region (Region 5), California State Historic Preservation Officer, Nevada State Historic Preservation Officer, and Advisory Council on Historic Preservation Regarding the Processes for Compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act for Management of Historic Properties by the National Forests of the Pacific Southwest Region (USFS 2018).

Proposed undertakings shall avoid historic properties. Avoidance means that no activities associated with undertakings that may affect historic properties, unless specifically identified in this Programmatic Agreement, shall occur within historic property boundaries, including any defined buffer zones (see clause 1.1(a), below). Portions of undertakings may need to be modified, redesigned, or eliminated to properly avoid historic properties (Appendix E, Clause 1.1, USFS 2018).

Buffer zones may be established to ensure added protection where Heritage Program Manager or District Heritage Program Staff determine that they are necessary. The use of buffer zones in avoidance measures may be applicable where setting contributes to property eligibility under 36 CFR 60.4, or where setting may be an important attribute of some types of historic properties (e.g., historic buildings or structures with associated historic landscapes, or traditional cultural properties important to Indians), or where heavy equipment is used in proximity to historic properties (Appendix E, Clause 1.1[a], USFS 2018).

Monitoring by heritage program specialists may be used to enhance the effectiveness of protection measures. The results of any monitoring inspections shall be documented in cultural resources reports and the Heritage 2.0 database (Appendix E, Clause 1.5, USFS 2018).

If standard protection measures prove inadequate or the project cannot be modified to protect sites, then full Section 106 consultation shall take place prior to the signing of any decision, as per the Programmatic Agreement Among the U.S.D.A. Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Region (Region 5), California State Historic Preservation Officer, Nevada State Historic Preservation Officer, and Advisory Council on Historic Preservation Regarding the Processes for Compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act for Management of Historic Properties by the National Forests of the Pacific Southwest Region (USFS 2018) section 7.8 (c) which states:

Inadvertent Discovery and Human Remains Protocols:

Cultural resources that may be encountered include archaeological and historic-period resources. Archaeological materials may include, but are not limited to, flaked stone tools (projectile point, biface, scraper, etc.) and debitage (flakes) made of chert, obsidian, etc., groundstone milling tools and fragments (mortar, pestle, handstone, millingstone, etc.), faunal bones, fire-affected rock, dark middens, housepit depressions and human interments. Historic-era resources may include, but are not limited to, cut (square) nails, containers or miscellaneous hardware, glass fragments, cans with soldered seams or tops, ceramic or stoneware objects or fragments, milled or split lumber, earthworks, feature or structure remains and trash dumps.

If a cultural resource is encountered at any time during the Project, the following steps will be taken immediately:

- Stop all work within 100 feet of the discovery;
- Notify the LNF Heritage Program Manager immediately;
- Leave the site or the artifact untouched;
- Note the circumstances that led to discovery; and
- Do not publicly reveal the location of the resource and ensure the location is secured.

In the event that either cultural resources are discovered or inadvertently affected during implementation of this undertaking, all work shall stop until the situation can be assessed by a qualified archaeologist and reported to the Heritage Program Manager, or assessed by the Heritage Program Manager. The Forest will submit written notification describing the circumstances of the discovery to the Regional Heritage Program Leader and State Historic Preservation Officer within two working days (e.g., letter or email notification). Forests will provide written reports describing the status or resolution of the discovery/inadvertent effect every six months until it is resolved (Section 7.10 Discoveries and Inadvertent Effects, (a) USFS 2013).

If human remains are discovered during the Project, the procedures identified in the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) will be closely adhered to and the following steps will be taken:

- Stop all work within 100 feet of the discovery;
- Notify the LNF immediately;
- Notify the county coroner;
- Treat the discovery location as a potential crime scene;
- Treat the remains with respect and do not handle, alter or remove bones;
- Do not publicly reveal the location of the remains; and
- Keep a log of all calls and events related to discovery.

Should inadvertent effects to or unanticipated discoveries of human remains be made during this undertaking, the County Coroner (California Health and Safety Code 7050.5(b)) or Sheriff if ex officio Coroner (Nevada Revised Statutes 259) shall be notified immediately. If the remains are determined to be Native American or if Native American (Indian) cultural items pursuant to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act are uncovered, the provisions of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act and its regulations at 43 CFR 10 and ARPA at 43 CFR 7 shall be followed on federal lands. (Section 7.9 Human Remains, (a) USFS 2013). No work may proceed in the immediate area until approved by the Heritage Program Manager of the LNF.

## **FINDINGS**

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or and environmental assessment (EA) and falls within two categories of actions listed in 36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 220.6(e):



Category 6 (36 CFR 220.6(e)(6)) - Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction.

Category 12 (36 CFR 220.6(e)(12)) - Harvest of live trees not to exceed 70 acres, requiring no more than ½ mile of temporary road construction. The proposed action may include incidental removal of trees for landings, skid trails, and road clearing.

I find that there are no extraordinary circumstances that warrant further analysis and documentation in an EA or EIS. I took into account resource conditions identified in agency procedures that should be considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances might exist:

Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species:

**Aquatic Species –**

There are no federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitats, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat that are known within or adjacent to the proposed project. There are no known Forest Service sensitive aquatic species that are within the project area.

**Botanical Species –**

There are no known occurrences of Threatened, Endangered, or Forest Service Sensitive plant species or associated habitat within the project area (See the Biological Evaluation/Biological Assessment for the Table Mountain Wildfire Protection Project for Federally listed and Forest Service sensitive species and determinations.)

**Wildlife –**

There are no federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitats, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat within or adjacent to (within ¼ mile) the project area. There are no Forest Service sensitive terrestrial species that would be adversely affected by the proposed action. See the Biological Evaluation/Biological Assessment for the Table Mountain Wildfire Protection Project for analyses of sensitive terrestrial species and their habitats and determinations.

Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds:

The Project Area is not in a municipal watershed, nor are there any wetlands present.

Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas:

There are none present.

Inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas:

There are none present.

Research natural areas:

There are none present.

American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites:

There are none present.

Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas:

There are none present.

## **FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS**

This decision is consistent with the goals, objectives, and management direction of the 1992 *Lassen National Forest Land Management Plan* and 1993 *Record of Decision (ROD)* as amended by the 2004 *Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (SNFPA)* Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and ROD and the 2007 *Sierra Nevada National Forests Management Indicator Species (SNF MIS)* Amendment FEIS and ROD.

This project meets the requirements of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, and implementing procedures outlined in the Region 5 Programmatic Agreement.

This project will be conducted in accordance with requirements of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended.

This project will be conducted in accordance with the requirements of the California Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board to ensure compliance with California Water Code and the Federal Clean Water Act.

## **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

This action was originally listed as a proposal on the Lassen National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions June 6, 2018 and updated periodically during the analysis. Project information was posted to the public website, notices were posted in the Intermountain News and the Mountain Echo Newspapers, and the Pit River Tribe was contacted, and letters were mailed out to interested parties in June 2018. One favorable written response was received.



## ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW (APPEAL) OPPORTUNITIES

This decision is not subject to appeal or objection by individuals or organizations. The Forest Service no longer offers notice, comment or appeal opportunities pursuant to 36 CFR 215 for categorically excluded projects.

## IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This project is anticipated to be implemented in Summer 2019.

## CONTACT

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: Kym Ganz, by phone at (530) 336-3383.

JOSEPH HOFFMAN

6-19-2019

Date

Acting District Ranger

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